



Watertown Town Council

Administration Building
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ELECTED OFFICIALS:

Mark S. Sideris,
Council President

Vincent J. Piccirilli, Jr.,
Vice President

Michael F. Dattoli,
Councilor At Large

Aaron P. Dushku,
Councilor At Large

Susan G. Falkoff,
Councilor At Large

Anthony Palomba,
Councilor At Large

Angeline B. Kounelis,
District A Councilor

Lisa J. Feltner,
District B Councilor

Kenneth M. Woodland,
District D Councilor

SPECIAL TOWN COUNCIL & SCHOOL COMMITTEE MEETING MONDAY, MARCH 21, 2016 AT 6:30 PM RICHARD E. MASTRANGELO COUNCIL CHAMBER ADMINISTRATION BUILDING

In accordance with provisions of Rule 2.6 of the Rules of the Town Council, and pursuant to the Call of the Town Council President, a Special Meeting of the Town Council of the City known as the Town of Watertown will be held with the School Committee on Monday, March 21, 2016 at 6:30 pm, in the Richard E. Mastrangelo Council Chamber, Administration Building in order to have a presentation on a Third Party Review of the General and Special Education School Budgets by RSM (formerly McGladrey).

MINUTES

1. ROLL CALL

Council President Sideris called to order a special joint meeting of the Town Council and the School Committee at 6:30 p.m. in the Richard E. Mastrangelo Chamber, Administration Building. Those present were Councilors Michael F. Dattoli, Aaron P. Dushku, Susan G. Falkoff, Angeline B. Kounelis, Lisa J. Feltner, Anthony Palomba, Kenneth M. Woodland, Vice President Vincent Piccirilli, Jr., and Council President Mark S. Sideris. John Portz, Chairman of the School Committee, asked Committee Member Guidotti, School Committee Secretary, to call the roll for the School Committee. Those present for the School Committee were John Portz, Kendra Foley, Candace Miller, Eileen Hsu Balzer, and Guido Guidotti. Elizabeth Yusem arrived at 7:00 pm. Others present were Michael Driscoll, Town Manager, Dr. Jean Fitzgerald, Watertown Superintendent of Schools, Charles Kellner, Director of Business Services, and Marilyn Pronovost, Town Council Clerk.

2. INFORMATIONAL PRESENTATION:

- a) Informational Presentation on a Third Party Review of the General and Special Education School Budgets by RSM (formerly McGladrey).

President Sideris explained that the meeting was an informational meeting presented by RSM (formerly McGladrey) regarding their review of the General and Special Education budgets for the Watertown Public Schools and how the Town can best fund the needs of the school.

Mr. Driscoll explained the purpose of the third party review. He then introduced Mr. Dan Wheadon of RSM.

Mr. Wheadon explained RSM's fact-finding process. He then introduced Mr. Craig Finley, the Project Lead, for RSM's findings.

Mr. Finley stated that the scope was to review the budgets for Fiscal Year (FY) '14 and '15. During their time in Watertown, RSM has seen improved visibility, transparency, and reporting capabilities and that there is a good collaboration between faculty and staff in better providing information to the Town.

Mr. Finley presented the Executive Summary Review. Costs for Special Needs services were higher in Watertown on a per pupil basis. This fact may be skewed by Watertown's proximity to special education resources within the community. They also reviewed the schools' organizational structures and town expenditures.

The team used a process of Discovery, Analysis, and Development.

There are opportunities for service type deliveries to use shared resources, such as School Facilities and DPW; shared IT staff; and shared finance positions.

Two essential positions for a school system are the Business Manager and the Special Ed Administrator. The success of a school system is often based on the stability of these positions. There is a request to seek added authority for the Business Manager so that the Superintendent can focus on running the school system. Since the position for Business Manager has been filled, there is significant improvement in categorizing, appropriating, and requesting expenditures. The improved internal process allows for better reporting to the Town Manager and the Town Council.

Some of the finding were

- There is an inefficient leveraging of key IT systems. The Student Information System is being replaced, MUNIS is being underutilized and the system relating to Grants could be updated at a minimal cost for a larger return.
- The schools are using Mass School Association budgeting templates that are meant to be used as a starting point and should be defined to meet school specific needs.
- The budget policies regarding line item transfers need to be clarified.
- The financial processing manual needs to be expanded. As changes are being implemented, the data should be more accurate for historical purposes and future forecasting.
- Reporting needs to be readily available to the School Committee and the Town Council to assist in the budgeting process.
- There is a strong support of the schools. The Council has provided for a fixed minimum percentage of increase in the budget.
- Professional development budget is slightly higher than the state average, but it allows for a broader spectrum of the staff to receive training.

- The Town Council and School Committee did not meet often but there seems to be ongoing conversations.
- Capital Improvement is providing for some needs, but with the overall needs of the buildings and the enrollment, the school should work with the MSBA.
- There is a need for a formal IT study. Systems seem to have reached a plateau and they need to provide data across systems.
- The Watertown per pupil cost of \$17,000 + is among the higher ratios across the Commonwealth. This figure is also inflated by the extensive before and after school services and the insertion of grant monies that are rolled into the budget.
- The title of Business Manager should be elevated to Assistant Superintendent of Business and Operations to reflect the work that is being completed and to provide this person with more authority to act on behalf of the Superintendent.
- For a school system of Watertown's size, there should be two Assistant Superintendents: one for curriculum and one for business operations.
- Co Teaching in Watertown is one of the more successful models.
- Where possible, events such as hiring should occur earlier in the year to prevent loss of good candidates.
- Common procurement with the Town is more efficient and provides for an easier year-end audit.
- Social Services in the Town are strong.

There were three basic objectives:

1. Organizational Stabilization – Fixing the Foundation
2. Strategic Development – Improve Things not yet Broken
3. Optimatization

Milly O'Callaghan then presented ideas on Special Education Services. Her findings were

- Watertown has a very strong program
- The staff is dedicated to the students but there is a high staff turnover and the root cause needs to be determined.
- The Town should develop in house special needs programs, which it is beginning to do.
- There could be small programs located in one building, such as one school be the provider for autism services or behavioral needs to allow for the maximization of resources and prevent out of district placements.
- There is recognition of the behavioral health needs of the students in the community.
- The new Special Education Administrator will need support to prevent high turnover in staff and to develop consistency of services.
- Watertown has achieved National Association for Young Children accreditation for its early childhood program, which is a rigorous and difficult process, and the accreditation should be maintained to continue receiving grants.

Some recommendations for Special Education include:

- Update programs descriptions
- Develop a district-wide Special Education process and procedure manual

- Continue development of a strong Curriculum Accommodation Plan or Response to Intervention (RTI) to remove the need for some Special Education referrals
- Provide training for universal design for learning strategies – this is starting
- Audit the need for the number of instructional assistants
- Develop a five-year plan for program development, material needs, technology needs which can then be tied into the budget process
- Develop partnerships with other private school providers to share resources
- Develop technology to automate the Special Education process, such as MUNIS or eSPED, ebooks, or other relevant education applications
- Take advantage of grants under Every Child Succeeds Act, which requires funding for mental and behavioral health, a strategic goal of the Watertown Schools, to enhance funding
- Develop a plan of focused professional development especially as the law requires all staff have 15 professional development points relating to Special Ed and the English Language Learner
- Reduce out of district placements by reviewing their needs and develop an in house program

Ms. Foley, Vice-Chair of the School Committee, asked how much the higher than average per pupil costs broke down. The cost for in house services is 11% over state average and 113% over state average for Special Education.

Dr. Miller, School Committee member, asked if staff felt children were being placed out of district who should be serviced in house. Ms. O’Callaghan could not speak to this issue, but stated that often the approach is to send out children and then not to revisit the concepts for the placement.

Councilor Dattoli asked what RTI process was observed. Ms. O’Callaghan did not observe any model but spoke with principals and staff. She felt the process is strong in the elementary level because the child is with the teacher all day. As children move to higher education levels, this becomes harder because the child is changing classrooms and has different teachers.

Councilor Dattoli asked what information would be reviewed in an audit of aides. Ms. O’Callaghan stated each Individual Education Plan (IEP) would need to be reviewed. There would need to be a review of the process each school team uses to recommend an aide and why the aide is being assigned.

Councilor Kounelis asked how children are reintegrated into the community school. Ms. O’Callaghan stated that the Special Education Administrator works with placement staff to determine the child’s needs and to determine if the placement meets the needs of the child. A placement change can occur because the initial placement did not meet the child’s needs; the goals of the IEP were met; or the school has developed an in-house program. Bringing them back is a coordinated effort with the parents, the staff of both the placement and the community school with ongoing observations and progress reports.

Ms. Foley asked how the higher than average per pupil costs broke down. The cost for in house services is 11% over state average and 113% over state average.

Dr. Miller asked for the data tables relating to services. This will be provided.

Councilor Dattoli asked for a description of co-teaching. Co-teaching is combination of a general education and a special education teacher in the same classroom. This is working well in Watertown but there are different levels of resource experience within the program.

John Portz, School Committee Chairman, asked if Watertown's experience is typical compared to other communities and if in district placement was actually cheaper. Ms. O'Callaghan stated that in-house servicing is currently more typical. In harder economic times, in-house services tend to be developed more to maintain lower costs. Programs can be developed and shared with other communities, increasing tuition revenue for the community. If the child is in-district, the community is not buying the services of the placement, such as speech therapy. There would be more resource sharing which is less costly. In addition, the child is included in the community.

Eileen Hsu Balzer, School Committee member, asked about the effect of the buildings and space on Special Education. Sometimes the building creates barriers to starting a program with such factors as ADA.

Dr. Miller asked what methods were used to making the recommendations. Mr. Finley stated there were conversations with fifteen people randomly selected; building administrators were spoken with individually and as a group; and curriculum coordinators at each level were met. Office and support staff were used as a focus group. The group met with randomly selected Town Council and School Committee members, Dr. Fitzgerald, Charles Kellner, Tom Tracy, and Mike Driscoll. They also met with the WPSI union liaison regarding the staff's involvement in the budget process.

The financial analysis was derived from summary data reports from end of year budget report and compared that with the report submitted to the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE). The program and grant summaries and the relevant controls processes were reviewed as well as how the records were retained. The staff were asked about their involvement with the budget process and the communication between them and administrative leaders. No prescribed questions were used to avoid the feel of being "interviewed."

A staff CPA reviewed the data and had meetings with groups as needed to clarify issues. At each meeting, there were note takers. The material was gathered and the report prepared.

President Sideris cautioned people not to focus on just the statistics.

Mr. Driscoll asked for the recommendations regarding General Education. Mr. Finley recommended

- Providing budget clarity by preparing good back-up detail for each appropriation
- Having Budget forums to get community input
- Stabilizing Account structures; then the data can be used for historical data and forecasting
- School Committee needs to create and define policies for transfers; the current template is insufficient
- Good policies will improve overall budgetary process; initial allocations to the accounts will be correct from the beginning in the future
- Create a process and procedure manual especially for fund depositing to prevent untimely check deposits and enhance privacy controls
- Formalize budget procedures and training and use automated processes to improve efficiencies and to standardize budget processes
- While difficult, forecasting should be attempted to set long term goals and needs
- The budget process should be speeded up and developed into a continuous cycle
- Communication and rationales for not funding certain items makes for better understanding among all parties
- Improve data collection – convert to Power School as a tool – to assist teachers with understanding needs of students and outcomes of stated goals

Ms. Foley asked about the recommended three year look back for historical data. Based on the issues that are currently being resolved, when can the town rely on the lookback. Mr. Finley stated that FY'18 would probably be the first good look; FY'17 will be improved but not complete.

Councilor Piccirilli stated that he would have liked to have more detail as to how the figures were arrived at. Mr. Finley agreed to provide that in an addendum. He also agreed to provide an addendum relating to a Scope of Services request reviewing the appropriateness of the schools spending as presented in the end of year review. A third addendum will also be provided of the review of the Massachusetts Association of School Business Officials (MASBO) recommendations. Mr. Finley disagreed with the MASBO recommendations relating to the contracting of custodians because it does not provide a large savings and the use of credit cards, as it is inherent with problems in a system working with a limited budget, such as a school system.

Councilor Piccirilli asked if all 27 recommendations were achievable in three years. Mr. Finley agreed that it was. Councilor Piccirilli then asked for an assessment of the quality of the Watertown school district. Mr. Finley stated there were many positives – the willingness to service all children in both general and special education; the extensive before and after school activities; and the recognition of the need for capital expenditures. The major drawback from making Watertown a quality system are the buildings. Overall, the community recognizes the changing environment of the town and is working to adapt to the changes.

Councilor Dushku asked for recommendations as to how to implement the changes. Mr. Finley stated that there should be joint collaborative strategic planning initiatives between the Town Council and the School Committee and other general strategic planning. He further stated that each recommendation was made based on its ability of being achieved within three years. Councilor Dushku then asked if

there was any resistance to the process or disagreement with the recommendations. Mr. Finley felt that everyone was helpful.

Mr. Portz asked for the rationale of moving up the budget date. Mr. Finley stated that this provided for a better pool of teaching candidates and that it was helpful for the Town in completing its budgetary planning. Mr. Portz stated that the information is not provided earlier because it is waiting for data from the state.

Mr. Driscoll stated there was disagreement about moving the budget date up to May as it was inconsistent with State law and the Town Charter. In the last 23 budgets, the budget is voted on no later than the last week of June, and in that time, the Town Council has not voted less than what the Town Manager recommended. He thought that the community could use the common practice of hiring in April with the hire subject to appropriation.

Councilor Palomba asked if conversations were beginning between the Town and School. They are beginning. He asked what the distinction was between High, Medium, and Low classifications. This related to the impact the recommendation would have on the School or Town, whether there was a budgetary or organizational impact, or the ease of implementation and the effect it had. Councilor Palomba asked if they reviewed whether these recommendations would need increased staff. Mr. Finley stated that this was beyond the scope of the review. The current organization chart indicates no void in personnel. Councilor Palomba wanted to know if it was fair that there would be costs to implement the recommendations. That was fair; most likely they would be one-time costs that would provide efficiencies for the school system. Councilor Palomba further asked if some of the costs would be offset by the gains. Mr. Finley concurred.

Councilor Palomba then asked based on the suggested organizational chart if there would be any loss in personnel. Mr. Finley stated no, just reorganized.

President Sideris stated that the recommendations would be taken up in conversations with the School Committee. Mr. Portz added thanks for the effort. The data in the addenda and the listing of strengths and improvements will be helpful. The School Committee can report back as to how to implement the changes.

3. ADJOURNMENT

Councilor Piccirilli moved to adjourn the meeting; Councilor Dushku seconded the motion. The motion was adopted unanimously on a voice vote. The meeting adjourned at 9:10 p.m.

ADDENDUM

I hereby certify that at a regular meeting of the Town Council for which a quorum was present, the above minutes were adopted by unanimous voice vote on April 12, 2016.

Mark S. Sideris, Council President
s/MWP